

2 September 1954

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON VIETNAMESE POLITICO-RELIGIOUS GROUPS

Cao Dai

Originating as a purely religious movement, the Cao Dai, the most important of the sects, is now more conspicuous as a political and military force. The headquarters of the movement is at Tayninh, some 60 miles north of Saigon. Its spiritual chief, who is also very much a politician, is the "pope" Pham Cong Tac. Embassy Saigon calls him a "sincere charlatan." In May 1954 he wrote a letter to Ho Chi Minh, hinting at Cao Dai-Viet Minh rapprochement.

The military leader of the Cao Dai forces, which number about 10,000, is General Nguyen Thanh Phuong. He has as his political adviser, Phan Xuan Thai. The religious and military hierarchies of the Cao Dai do not always work in harmony. An important splinter group of Caodaists is that under Trinh Minh The, formerly chief of staff of the Cao Dai forces as a whole. This group, which calls itself the "National Resistance Front" maintains an armed force of several thousand along the Vietnam-Cambodian frontier.

The political and military strength of the Cao Dai derives in large part from a devout following of from several hundred thousand to a million, almost all of whom are located in south Vietnam.

- 2 -

The general political orientation of the Cao Dai is nationalist and anti-Communist, but its dealings with the French and Vietnamese authorities have been characterized by a strong element of opportunism and venality. As is the case with the other sects, the support of the Cao Dai must invariably be bought either with government jobs or economic prizes such as rice export licenses.

Hoa Hao

This is the most amorphous of the sects. Beginning as a single religious movement, it fell into the hands of military adventurers whose disputes and momentary alliances among themselves and with the central government virtually defy analysis. There are four, sometimes five, Hoa Hao military commands. There are a million or so people in the Mekong delta area west of Saigon but it is doubtful that more than a small fraction of this population identifies itself with the Hoa Hao movement. Opportunism is even more marked among the Hoa Hao chieftains than among the Caodaists.

The leaders who are currently opposed to the central government are General Tran Van Soai and Colonel Le Quang Vinh. A government official estimates their troops to number 8-10,000. The same informant says that General Lam Thanh Nguyen commands about 7000 troops and General Nguyen Giac Ngo 3-4000. The latter is described as a strong supporter of the Diem government.

- 3 -

Binh Xuyen

This gangster organization gained influence by fighting its way to control of the underworld and the gambling industry of Saigon's Chinatown. Its control of the highly lucrative gambling concession has been sanctioned by Bao Dai at a gain to him of several million dollars. In May 1954 the Binh Xuyen was vested by Bao Dai with control of the national police force, thus greatly extending its power. Premier Diem has been unable to remove the Binh Xuyen from control of the police.

Catholics

They number about 1.5 million, the majority of whom are in Tonkin. Their influence is considerable, although there is no official Catholic political organization. As Vietnam's leading Catholic layman, Premier Diem enjoys particular prestige among his fellow religionists. The numerous native hierarchy, including three politically active bishops, supports him. One of the bishops is Diem's brother, Ngo Dinh Thuc.